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1987

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# PILGRIMAGES ALONG SACRED PATHS

ROBERT H. STODDARD\*

## 1. Introduction

Geographic explanations about circulation and movement are largely concerned with the role of distance in spatial behaviour. More specifically, many geographic principles of location are based on the friction of distance as it tends to restrict circulation and movement of humans. Likewise, the geography of routes usually involves concepts of least effort and the minimization of travel distance. A few pathways of movement, however, do not seem to entirely fit these basic geographic concepts.

When people engage in religious activities that involve travel along a prescribed path, the role of distance seems to function quite differently than expressed by the major geographic principles. To a certain degree, several forms of behaviour associated with sacred spaces tend to challenge fundamental principles of geographic behaviour; but movements along sacred paths especially contrast with established knowledge.

It is important, therefore, to examine the specific religious activities (namely, pilgrimages, circumambulations, and processions) that involve movement along sacred paths. It is hoped that this paper, which focuses on aspects of pilgrimages along sacred paths, will

contribute to both the geography of religion and of human movements.

## 2. The Three Dimensions of Sacred Space

The geography of sacred space can be examined in each of the three dimensions: as points, lines, or areas. It is recognized that any given phenomenon is not permanently matched with one dimensional class because its assignment into a particular category depends partly upon scale. Consider, as an example, city streets. A map showing their distribution within a large country would undoubtedly depict them as points. Thus, to represent the distribution of city streets of India on a page-size map would necessitate reducing clusters of lines to dots (which would be positioned at the sites of major cities).

In contrast, on a page-size map of Bombay, the streets of the city would normally appear as lines. At yet another scale—one that was designed to show street features and activities along a 50 m stretch—a city street would be represented as an area.

Although the emphasis in this paper is on linear features (i. e., routes), some preliminary comments about the other two dimensions of sacred areas and sacred points provide a framework for the subsequent discussion.

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**2.1. Sacred Areas.** Space is not homogeneous for the religious person who conceives of sacred places as qualitatively different from profane places (Eliade 1957; Isaac 1959-60). Some places are important not because of physical features of the site nor because of their situation relative to other places but because they are sanctified. For persons with this view, spatial activity is not motivated primarily to minimize distance, to optimize income, or to achieve similar secular objectives that are commonly assumed in geographic analysis. Rather, spatial behaviour can only be interpreted meaningfully when it is viewed from the perspective of believers who recognize that certain areas are imbued with divine meaning.

Recognition of sacred areas is illustrated well by the planning and construction of towns according to a divine design. In ancient India, cosmological concepts were incorporated into the arrangement of town features (Dutt 1925). Paul Wheatley (1971 : 439-440) described it as :

In the Hindu realm the ideal-city also conformed to a cosmomagical pattern, and its founding was treated as the preparation of sacrificial ground...The site was selected with care according to the ritualistic (and sanitary) prescriptions preserved in the traditions and treatises of the masterbuilders, and the city was laid out as a moated, rectangular enclosure exhibiting cardinal orientation and axiality...Round the outer edge of the city ran...the Auspicious Way or Path of Blessing, along which was drawn the chariot of the presiding deity, and along which the population proceeded in the rite of *pradakṣiṇā*.

The arrangement of a city that was constructed to coincide with the cosmic design

often formed a mandala (Stoddard 1981/82; Tucci 1973; Singh 1987a). Hence, the geography of an urban area, which directly manifested the religious concepts of sacred space, delineated a sacred area.

In Nepal, where traditional religious systems have been isolated from the secularization of industrial societies until recent decades, remnants of sacred patterns can be observed. The Newari city dwellers of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur live within spaces that have cosmological meaning. The arrangement of the cities themselves, each of their minor subdivisions, and individual dwellings reveal (to varying degrees) religious concepts of space. In terms of separating sacred area from profane territory, this is expressed in the location of shrines. By surrounding each of the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley with a set of protective shrines, inhabitants have marked the boundaries of sacred areas (Auer and Gutschow 1974; Gutschow 1982; Pieper 1975).

Even though geographers do not normally study spaces insides buildings, this topic of sacred areas can also be illustrated at the scale of floor plans. The delineation of sacred living space is very evident by noting the role of *Vāstu-vidyā*, the spiritual science of architecture. This practice accepts Hindu cosmology as the divine model for the construction of buildings and the organization of interior space (Vogt 1971; Singh 1987a). To enter a dwelling or temple that was constructed according to the principles of *Vāstu-vidyā* is to cross the threshold into sacred space.

**2.2. Sacred Points.** Sacred points (sites) have attracted the attention of geographers even more than sacred areas because religious sites are often associated with pilgrimages, and pilgrimages continue to interrelate with nume-

rous contemporary phenomena. Although sometimes pilgrimage destinations are examined as areas with internal variations (Dubey 1985; Hirt 1961; Naganatha Rao 1937; Singh 1987b, 1988; Thirunaranam & Padmanabhan 1957), frequently they are studied at the scale at which they are regarded as sacred points.

Sacred points have been studied spatially by looking at their locations either by site or situation. Site studies often examine characteristics of the natural environment, such as the existence of a cave, a coastal protruberance a mountaintop or similar high place, a stream, a spring, a gas vent, or similar features. Numerous descriptive studies have mentioned the particular natural environment that seems to give sanctity to specific places, but generally researchers have been unable to indicate why only a few caves, mountaintops, springs, etc., are sacred while the majority are not. One of the most extensive examinations into site characteristics revealed that only about a third of Christian pilgrimage places in Europe are associated with distinctive site features (Nolan, f. c.). Many places without distinguishing physical characteristics became sacred because of events that just happened to occur at a particular place.

Studies of situation have examined the locations of sacred places in terms of their positions relative to other phenomena. Often the other phenomena have included the distributions of total and/or selected populations, especially as they involve the concepts of core and periphery (Messerschmidt & Sharma 1981; Sopher 1987; Turner 1973) and field (Eliade 1957; Turner 1975) or nodal regions (Bhardwaj 1973; Sopher 1967; Stoddard 1971). The core versus periphery issue concerns whether sacred places are located close to the core area of a population distri-

bution or not situated at more peripheral positions. Other studies of sacred points have examined their spatial situation relative to the nodal regions (or, fields) from which pilgrims originate.

The same kind of geographic analysis of sacred points occurs at the local scale. The role of core and periphery may be expressed by the question: Do holy places within an urban area occupy its core as the feature of focus and domination? Or, are sacred shrines commonly placed along the traditional boundaries of the settlement (see above)?

In contrast to the number of studies examining sacred places as areas and points at various scale, the geography of sacred lines has had limited scrutiny. The remainder of this paper, therefore, concentrates on this dimension of sacred space.

**2.3. Sacred Paths.** All movements to religious places require traversing earth space, and the configurations of those traverses can be mapped. In this respect, we can refer to routes of travel as lines of activity associated with religious motives. Such movements are not insignificant. The account of travel along some routes, such as those followed by the millions of pilgrims to the Hajj and other pilgrimage centres of the world each year, has numerous economic, political, and social implications.

In spite of the importance of such religious movement, it is not the focus of attention here because the routes per se are not necessarily regarded as sacred. (In fact, here the term "route" is used to refer to any line of travel from one place to another. The reasons for taking a particular route concern its associated cost, ease of movement, and similar non-religious motives. For purposes of contrast, the term "path" is used here to specify a line

travel that is followed because *the line itself* has religious meaning).

Some approaches to pilgrimage places may be perceived in a transitional category. If there is essentially only one approach, for example, along a valley leading to a holy site in mountainous region, and all worshippers follow the same route, then it becomes the established pathway. Whether such an approach is regarded as an extension of the sacred territory that radiates outwards from the holy spot or just another part of the regular route that must be traversed to arrive at the sacred destination may depend on the perceptions of the pilgrims.

Generally the religious significance of a path seems to be more important when the line of travel is circular or closed than when it is only a line of approach. This is not always the case, however. The great pilgrimage (*junrei*) to the 88 places on Shikoku (Japan) follows a well established route, but its function is primarily to connect the multiple sacred points (Tanaka 1981). Likewise, the journey around the Kathmandu Valley to the four Ganesh shrines can be regarded as a circular pilgrimage, where the goal is to worship at the four sacred sites during an auspicious day (Stoddard 1980). Even though the direction of travel from one shrine to the next is important the specific route taken to connect the shrines is not critical. In these examples, movement is along a closed line, but that line can be considered as a circular "route" rather than a sacred path.

The sanctity of the pathway is seldom in question, however, when the movement involves a procession or circumambulation. For these types of movement, the line of travel itself carries religious significance. The purpose of travel is not just to travel from one

spot to another—it is to move along a prescribed line that possesses religious meaning.

### 3. Circumambulations

Circumambulations occur at a variety of scales. One of the most famous—the great *parikramā* of Mount Kailāśa in Tibet—is more than 50 km long (Snelling 1983). Because it is sacred to Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, and followers of the Bon religion, pathways vary with the backgrounds of the pilgrims. Some pilgrims, for example, include the subsidiary *parikramā* of Lake Mānasarovara, but others do not. Although the pathways around the holy mountain do vary somewhat, they all constitute prescribed pathways of sanctity.

The *pañcakrośī parikramā*, which encircles Vārāṇasī, is another major sacred way. The cosmos is manifested by this path, so the entire 80 km of this circular path exists as sacred space (Singh 1987b, and forthcoming). To walk this pathway, therefore, is to accomplish more than just travelling from place to place—it is to worship by moving through a tunnel of sanctified space connecting 108 shrines.

More detailed characteristics of circumambulation can be illustrated by movement around the religious centre of Janakpur, a town in Nepal's terai region. There are three circumambulatory routes around Janakpur (Jha 1971). The longest one, with a perimeter length of 268 km, is undertaken mainly by sadhus and yogis. The one of middle length, which is 128 km long, takes about fifteen days for most pilgrim groups. The shortest one takes four or five hours because its length is only 8 km; however, some worshippers complete the circuit several times in order to earn greater merit.

Normally pilgrims move along one of the Janakpur *parikramās* in a group accompanied

by religious musicians and guides, who know the route and the proper acts of worship at designated places. Pilgrims are responsible for their own living arrangements; but, as they pass through settlements along the route, they may be given food and firewood by the local villagers. In case a person is handicapped and unable to walk, he/she can request another person to undertake the pilgrimage and thus receive the transferred benefits.

In addition to these parikramās that involve several kilometres each, there are many that involve movement of only a few metres around temples or other sacred places (cf. Singh 1987b). This change in scale from long treks to short strolls may alter some of the accompanying procedures and activities. Nevertheless, the basic focus—the movement along a sacred way—constitutes the fundamental form of spatial behaviour.

#### 4. Processions

The primary factor that gives direction to movement that is circumambulatory, is the desire to encircle a sacred area or centre. In contrast, the directional aspects of many processions are less obvious. Undoubtedly some processions resemble parades where participants move along public streets as they display their religion. Processions of this type probably follow a route through an area that tends to maximize public exposure. In other cases, however, the purpose is not to just wind through a neighbourhood or along a public thoroughfare, but rather to follow a specific path that has religious meaning. For instance, the pathway may guide worshippers in a ceremonial reenactment of a past movement by a revered religious leader, such as illustrated by Christians who follow the Stations of the Cross.

There is limited information about a wide variety of sacred paths (for details and varieties see Gutschow 1982). A few spatial characteristics and geographic associations, however, can be noted from the following two processions in Kathmandu.

The Upakha procession, which is undertaken primarily by the Newar population, occurs only at a special time each year. Participants are mainly from families in which member died during the previous year.

In the evening of the prescribed day, the worshippers assemble at the originating site and then proceed for several hours in long lines around the procession way, which is illuminated by lamps in houses along the way. Some participants may stop to worship at shrines along the path, but the primary goal is to move around the sacred circuit.

Since the pathway is the sacred element, its location and patterns possess geographic interest (Figure 1, see Gutschow 1982 : 121-122). One plausible hypothesis about its configuration is that it coincides with an early boundary between the sacred area of habitation and an outer profane space.

Now it is rather difficult to determine the exact boundaries of the ancient Kathmandu, which is believed to have been delineated by the pathway. Although the area of settlement probably coincided with an upper terrace, the topography of the city has been altered by landfill in recent generations; thus the edge of the terrace on which the old city was sited is not always apparent (Malla 1971). The locations of springs and the use of neighbourhood names referring to former springs, however, do indicate some of the positions of the original terrace edge. Likewise, even though the areal size of Kathmandu has expanded

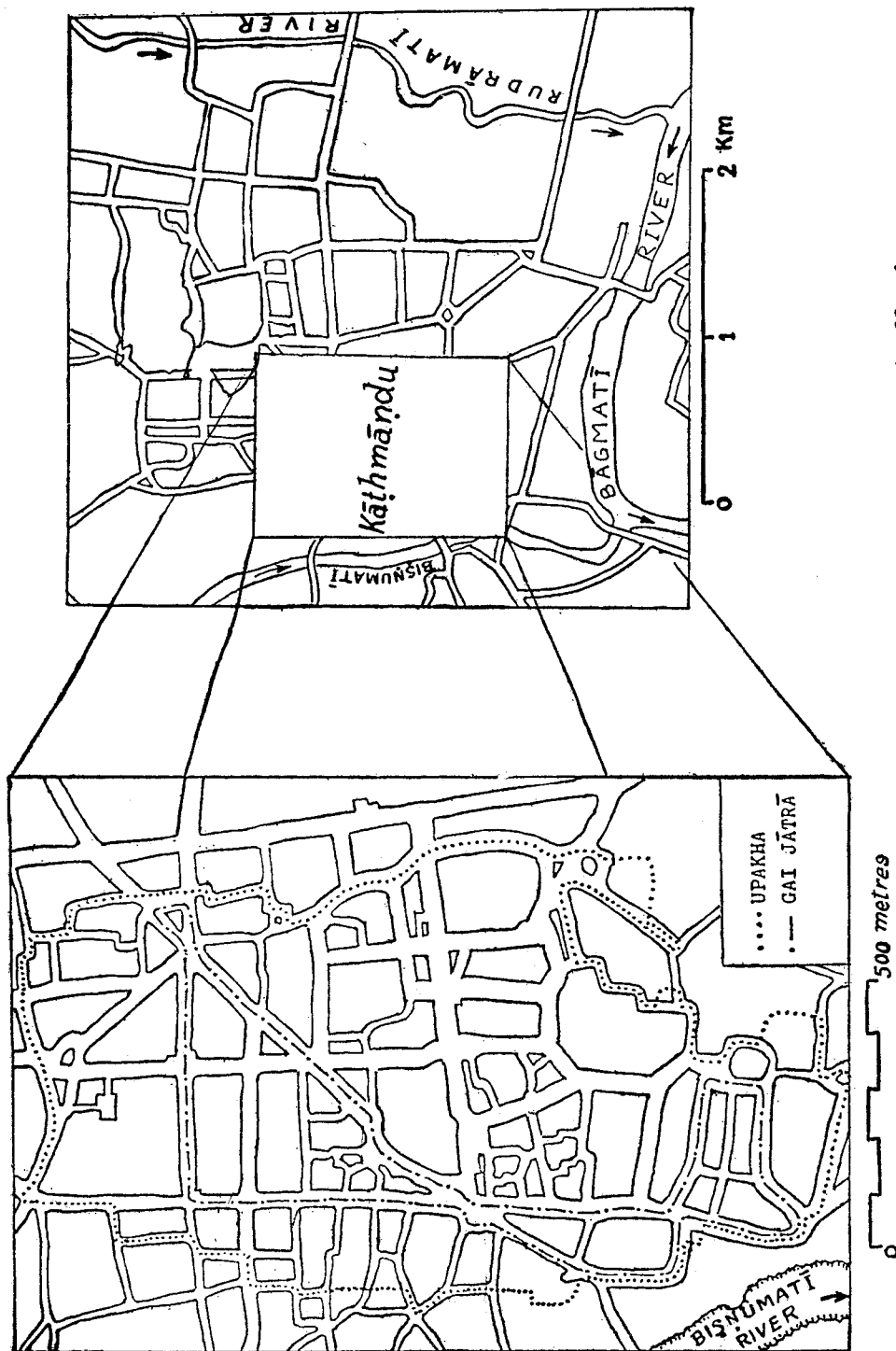


Fig. 1. Procession Routes for Upakha and Gai Jātrā in Kathmāṇḍu, Nepal.

greatly through time, the partial remains of an ancient wall reveal some of the positions of the outer perimeter of an earlier urban settlement. On the basis of these clues, it can be concluded that the present path of Upakha coincides quite well with the outer edge of the ancient city. If this conclusion is correct, the path of religious circulation today probably has its spatial origins in an annual delineation of sacred territory inhabited by earlier communities.

Another of the important religious occasions in the Kathmandu Valley, which also involves Newar families in which a member died during the preceeding year, is Gai Jatra. At the time of the festival, each family sends a decorated cow (or a boy representing a cow), the family priest, a troupe of musicians, and a small boy in the guise of a yogi around a prescribed path. In some communities, the groups may be accompanied by others who perform various comical skits. In most cases, the groups receive food and coins from householders along the route (Anderson 1971).

Family groups may join the procession at any place; they do not need to begin at a common point of departure. Even though participants may commence at different places, none will deviate from the designated pathway. In Kathmandu, the procession passes many temples and shrines, but this ancient path does not link a set of particularly sacred sites—at least, not a set of places identified today as being the most sacred.

Certainly, the geometry of the path does not appear to be one that minimizes distances among a set of points (Figure 1). In fact, an outside observer would conclude that no principle of spatial behaviour seems to explain the configuration of this sacred path.

## 5. Summary & Conclusion

For many pilgrims, travel is a necessary part of getting from home to a holy destination. The route that is taken to achieve the religious goal is not important. In some other circumstances, however, the pathway that is followed does have religious significance. This is especially true when the path is circular, such as in circumambulations and processions, when the religious goal is achieved through movement along the sacred way.

When the purpose of travel is shifted from merely traversing a section of the earth's surface to being a form of meaningful activity, the geographic implications also change. The sizable body of knowledge about the friction of distance and its effects on locational decisions and spatial distributions has contributed to a well developed geography of networks and movements along routes. In contrast, relatively little is known about the role of movement as a form of worship or about the configurations of paths along which participants move. For a more complete understanding of the circulation and movement of humans, geographers need to increase their knowledge about role of sacred paths.

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